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THE CONSTITUTION

AND

ORDER

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OF

A GOSPEL CHURCH

CONSIDERED.

BY

J. FAWCETT, A. M.

BEHOLDING YOUR ORDER, AND THE STEDFASTNESS OF YOUR
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THE
CONSTITUTION AND ORDER
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A GOSPEL CHURCH.

THE sacred scriptures are the only rule and standard to which we must have recourse, in our inquiries concerning the nature and order of the churches of Jesus Christ. Every thing necessary to be known on this subject is to be found in that most valuable of all books, the Bible, and more especially in the New Testament. The express commands of God therein contained, and the practice of the apostles and the primitive societies of the followers of Jesus are to be regarded with close and serious attention. Their examples are indeed a sort of precepts to us, seeing we are commanded to be followers of them, as they were followers of Christ.

There have been many unnecessary disputes concerning the meaning of the original word, used by the writers of the New Testament, which is usually translated *church*. It properly signifies an *assembly*, or a number of persons called and met together. It is sometimes used for a lawless and disorderly concourse of people, like that of the
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craftsmen at *Ephesus*. * The town-clerk informed that tumultuous crowd, that the matter in question should be determined in a lawful assembly; suggesting that the present was not lawfully convened. And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly. In these places the word is used which is elsewhere translated church. But for the most part, the sacred writers intend by this term, a religious society, or congregation.

By the word church we are sometimes to understand, the whole body of God's chosen people in every period of time. So we read of the general assembly and church of the first born. † Jesus Christ is the head of this his mystical body. ‡ It is the church which he hath purchased with his own blood. § The individuals of it are called, renewed, sanctified, and preserved by him on earth, and shall be glorified with him in heaven. These may be called the real, the invisible, the catholic, or the universal church.

The whole body of the people of Israel congregated together in the wilderness of *Sinai*, are denominated the church in the wilderness. ||

Those who make a public profession of faith in Christ, of a religious regard to the revealed will of God, and a subjection to his special authority and government, compose what we generally understand by the visible church. In this sense the apostle uses the term when he says, "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end. Amen." ** This
is

* Acts xix. 32, 39, 41. † Heb. xii. 23.

‡ Acts xx. 28. § Col. i. 18. || Acts vii. 38.

** Eph. iii. 21.

is the church built on Christ the rock, against which the gates of hell shall never prevail.* Such a church our divine Redeemer always had, and always will have. All real believers, in every part of the earth, whether they have the advantage of being united in distinct societies or not, belong to the church in this sense of the word; they are all united to Christ as their common head, and called in the nervous language of inspiration, members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. †

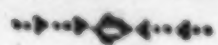
But the more general sense of the term church, as it is used in the New Testament, is that of an assembly of christians united together, and meeting in one place for the solemn worship of God. Nothing is more evident than that the primitive churches of Jesus Christ were not national. They were not even provincial. For though there were many believers and professing christians in *Judea*, in *Galilee*, in *Samaria*, in *Macedonia*, in *Galatia*, and other provinces, yet we never read of a provincial church in any of those places. The particular societies of christians in these districts are mentioned in the plural number. “I remind you of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of *Macedonia*. ‡ All the brethren which are with me, unto the churches of *Galatia*. § “Then had the churches rest throughout all *Judea*, and *Galilee*, and *Samaria*, and were edified.” ||

We find no mention made of diocesan churches in the New Testament. In the days of the apostles, bishops were so far from presiding over more churches than one, that sometimes a plurality of

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* Matt. xvi. 13. † Eph. v. 30. ‡ 2 Cor. viii. 1.
§ Gal. i. 2. || Acts ix. 31.



bishops presided over the same church. "To all the saints at *Philippi*, with the bishops and deacons." * In those early and happy times, clerical dignity and jurisdiction, supported by large temporalities, were unknown. The bishops or overseers, were supported by the voluntary contributions of their respective flocks. If those contributions were too scanty to afford them the common necessities of life, the bishops disdained not to work with their own hands.

I beg leave to say, that in the New Testament we find no mention made of parochial churches. Some of the inhabitants of a parish may be infidels, some may be Mahometans, and others may be Jews. But gospel churches consist of such as make an open profession of their faith in Christ, and of their subjection to the gospel. "To all that be in *Rome*, beloved of God, and called to be saints." † "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints." ‡

It is plain, then, that the primitive churches of Jesus Christ were properly congregational. The first church at *Jerusalem* met together in one place, at the same time. § And the church at *Antioch* did the same, when the apostles rehearsed how the Lord had dealt with them. || The church at *Corinth* came together into one place. ¶ And the church at *Troas* came together the first day of the week, to break bread. ** There was a church at *Cenchrea*, a port of *Corinth*, distinct from the church in that city. He that was a member of one church was

* Phil. i. 1.

† Rom. i. 7.

‡ 1 Cor. xiv. 33.

§ Acts. i. 14, 15.

|| Acts xiv. 27.

¶ 1 Cor. xiv. 23.

** Acts xx. 7.

was not a member of another. The apostle *Paul*, writing to the *Colossian* society, says, “*Epaphras*, who is one of you, saluteth you.” *

A particular christian church then, properly consists of such a number of persons as is sufficient to answer the ends of church fellowship, and may usually meet and worship together at the same time, and in one convenient place. The compilers of the thirty-nine articles justly define a church to be ‘a congregation of faithful men, in which the true word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered, according to Christ’s ordinances, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.’

Such a church, is a body distinguished from the civil societies of the world, by the spiritual nature and design of its government; and avowedly separated from the usurped kingdom of Satan. The members of such a church professedly renounce the sinful practices of the world, devoting themselves to God through Christ, in obedience to his commands, and in the expectation of eternal life, according to the gracious promises of his gospel.

The true members of gospel churches are fully convinced, that the kingdom of Christ is not of this world. † They come out from among the unclean. ‡ They are not of the world, § neither are they conformed to it in its sinful customs and practices. || They confess themselves strangers and pilgrims in the earth, seeking a better country, that is an heavenly. ¶ They set their affection on things

* Col. iv. 12. † Joh. xviii. 36. ‡ 1 Cor. vi. 17.
§ Joh. xvii. 16. || Rom. xii. 2. ¶ Heb. xi. 13, 15, 16.

things above, and have their conversation in heaven. *

These hints will naturally lead us to consider, of what sort of persons a gospel church should consist.

By considering the distinguishing characters of the persons who composed the churches of Jesus Christ, mentioned in the New Testament, this point of inquiry will be best determined.

The primitive churches consisted of persons who appeared, in a judgment of charity, to be the subjects of that divine change which is so often insisted on in the sacred scriptures, as essential to vital christianity. They were lively stones who were built up into the spiritual house of God. † To the members of the *Ephesian* church, the apostle says, "You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins." The society at *Colosse* consisted of persons who were risen with Christ, to a divine and spiritual life. ‡ The members of other churches appeared to be such as were born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. § They were renewed in the spirit of their minds. They were new creatures in Christ Jesus. They were begotten again to a lively hope by the resurrection of Christ from the dead. These different expressions denote that supernatural change from nature to grace, which our divine Redeemer represents under the figure of a new birth, without which he assures us a man can neither see, that is, understand, nor enter into the kingdom of God; || by which

* Phil. iii. 20. † 1 Pet. ii. 5. ‡ Col. iii. 1.
§ 1 Pet. i. 23. || John iii. 3, 5.

which is meant, his spiritual kingdom in this world, and the kingdom of glory in that which is to come.

The new birth is evidenced by its fruits. Accordingly, the persons of whom the primitive churches consisted were penitent persons. They repented of their former offences, they turned to God, and did works meet for repentance.* They believed, and gladly received the words of everlasting life. † They had recourse to the Redeemer of men, and looked to him for all their salvation, renouncing all dependence on their own righteousness for acceptance with God. They were the circumcision, putting off the body of sin, worshipping God in the Spirit, rejoicing in Christ Jesus, and had no confidence in the flesh. ‡ “Believers were the more added, multitudes both of men and women. § They came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds.” They were called with an holy calling, out of darkness into marvellous light, out of bondage into christian liberty; || called, not unto uncleanness but unto holiness; that they should deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world. Of such persons did the *Corinthian*, the *Galatian*, and other churches consist. They were disciples of Jesus. ¶ They had learned of him, the great Prophet of the church. They owned him for their Master, obeying his commands, denying themselves, taking up their crosses, following him, and endeavouring to walk even as he walked. They made an open and undisguised pro-

* Acts xxvi. 20.

† Acts ii. 41.

‡ Phil. iii. 3.

§ Acts xi. 21.

|| Gal. v. 13.

¶ Acts vi. 1.

profession of their faith in him, as the only Saviour, and of their hope of eternal life through him. They confessed, as with one voice, "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved." *

On this profession of their faith, they were baptized in water, in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. We have no account of any being admitted into fellowship with the churches mentioned in the New Testament without this. The three thousand penitents, converted by *Peter's* sermon on the day of Pentecost, gladly received the word, were baptized, and then added to the church. † The first church at *Samaria* consisted of persons baptized by *Philip*, when they believed what he preached concerning the kingdom of God. When *Lydia* and her household, and the jailor and his family believed, rejoicing in God, they were admitted to the same sacred ordinance, and laid the foundation of the church at *Philippi*. The church at *Corinth* was composed of persons who, hearing the word, believed, and were baptized. The church at *Ephesus* was formed of disciples baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. In like manner, the members of the churches at *Rome*, ‡ at *Galatia*, § and at *Colosse*, || it is evident, were baptized persons. These facts are too plain to be contradicted.

Such persons as we have briefly described are the only proper subjects of a gospel church. Yet we do not suppose that all those persons who constituted

* Acts xv. 11. † Acts ii. 41. & viii. 12. & xvi. 15, 33. & xviii. 8. & xix. 5. ‡ Rom. vi. 3, 4. § Gal. iii. 27. || Col. ii. 12.

Instituted the first churches of Jesus Christ were, without exception, the real children of God. Some individuals afterwards shewed themselves to have neither part nor lot in the matter. But when they were admitted into fellowship, they appeared, in a judgment of charity, to be what we have just mentioned.

It is necessary to be observed farther, that the qualifications specified above, do not formally constitute persons members of a particular gospel church. There must be an union, a coalition, a joining together, in order to constitute such a society. *Paul* assayed to join himself to the church. And of the rest durst no man join himself unto them. * The members of the primitive churches were joined together by a holy confederation, and mutual consent. They first gave themselves to the Lord † as his servants, his subjects, his redeemed people, and then unto his apostles, and to one another, by the will of God, to walk in fellowship together. All societies, and all relations, excepting that between parents and children, are formed by mutual consent, covenant or agreement. No individuals can be formed into a body, or joint society, without something of this kind, either expressed or understood. We might instance in civil combinations of various descriptions, in the relation between magistrates and subjects, masters and servants, husbands and wives.

The formation of the church at *Ephesus* is signified, by their being builded together, for an habitation of God through the Spirit. ‡ Every gospel church

* Acts v. 13. † 2 Cor. viii. 5. ‡ Eph. ii. 22.

church is a spiritual house, a dwelling where the living God resides. The materials of which, as we have seen, are lively stones. The foundation is Christ, who is also the chief corner stone. The constitution of the structure is denoted by the several parts being united together. The divine cement which unites the whole is love. Being knit together in love. * In other places union is expressed by a word which signifies being glued together. † A particular gospel church then is a voluntary society, formed by mutual agreement. This transaction implies in it the nature of a covenant, or mutual compact and stipulation, for all the respective duties and privileges of that relation. It is the custom in many of our churches to express this in writing; and though this circumstance cannot be thought essentially necessary to the constitution of a church, yet, if no unscriptural terms of communion are introduced, in my opinion, this custom is by no means unwarrantable.

The true nature of church fellowship lies in partaking of the same spirit and grace of Christ. For “he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit; ‡ and of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.” § It consists in all the members standing in the same relation to their glorious head. For thus we being many are one body in Christ, and every one members of one another. || It consists in enjoying the spiritual presence of the Redeemer, who hath said, Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world. ¶ The same ordinances are observed by those in church-communion, and the same

* Col. ii. 2. † Acts v. 13. & ix. 26. ‡ 1 Cor. vi. 17.
§ John i. 16. || Rom. xii. 5. ¶ Mat. xxviii. 20.

same common duties are to be performed, with unity of heart and affection. Thus we being many are one bread and one body; for we are all partakers of one bread.* The members of the first christian church continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.† The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul.‡ This is christian communion in its primitive purity and glory. How pleasing is the contemplation of it! How wisely and how happily is it adapted to promote the best interests of the followers of Christ, and to answer all the purposes of spiritual edification! The church of God is sometimes called the kingdom of heaven; and most certain it is, that nothing in this world bears so near a resemblance to the heavenly state.

There are many advantages connected with church fellowship which persons who do not stand in such an union cannot so fully enjoy. There are some promises which none can properly claim who neglect the ordinances of God, and the communion of saints. It is said, for instance, in the following passages, which may justly be thought to refer to gospel times, "Those that be planted in the house of the Lord, shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing.¶ In this mountain (the church of God) shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people, a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees; of fat things full of marrow, and of wines on the lees well refined. § For

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* 1 Cor. x. 16, 17. † Acts ii. 42. ‡ Acts iv. 32.
¶ Psal. xcii. 13. § Isai. xxv. 6.

the Lord hath chosen *Zion*; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest forever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread. I will also clothe her priests with salvation: and her saints shall shout aloud for joy.* They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house, and thou wilt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures.† They shall come and sing in the height of *Zion*, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord, and their soul shall be as a watered garden.‡ These promises peculiarly belong to those who have given up themselves to God in his holy ordinances, and are united together in the bonds of fervent piety and love. They only have a right to expect the full accomplishment of these gracious declarations.

The members of a christian society have incitements to holiness which are peculiar to themselves. As they make an open and visible profession of religion, they know that the eyes of the world are upon them, and that those who make no such profession are always ready to say, “What do ye more than others?” He who is appointed to be their pastor, is to watch for their souls, as one that must give an account; || and the several members are to have the same care one over another. § They are deterred from improprieties of conduct lest they should fall under the censure of the church, and be deprived of those privileges on which they are taught to put a high value. As they make a public profession of their warm and steady attachment to

* Psal. cxxxii. 13, 14, 15, 16. † Psal. xxxvi. 8.
 ‡ Jer. xxxi. 12. || Heb. xiii. 7. § 1 Cor. xii. 25.

to the truth, they are restrained from sinful practices, lest the name of God and his doctrine should be blasphemed; and they are excited to an upright and holy conversation, that they may adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour in all things. * The zealous christian will count it a happiness to be under these restraints.

The members of such a society have many peculiar incentives to be fervent in spirit in serving the Lord. They consider one another, to provoke unto love and to good works; but how can one be warm alone? † Virtuous and gracious affections are excited by christian society. Kindled coals, if placed asunder, soon grow cold; but if united together, they quicken each other, so as to keep up a lasting heat. The individuals which compose a spiritual household, have frequent opportunities of conversing together; and, as iron sharpens iron, so does a man the countenance of his friend. ‡ They frequently ask one another how their souls prosper, how their hearts are affected towards God and religion; and many watch-words are mutually given, to guard against negligence, drowsiness, and formality. The nature of the relation requires, that there should be vigorous endeavours, in all the members, to promote the spiritual welfare of the whole; and that they should unite in all proper exertions to keep up among themselves a warm and lively sense of the importance and excellency of divine objects. When they that fear the Lord speak often one to another, § for mutual edification, they experience the benefit of christian communion.

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* Titus ii. 5, and ii. 10. † Eccles. iv. 11.

‡ Prov. xxvii. 17. § Mal. iii. 16.

The members of a gospel church have peculiar helps contributing to their recovery when they are drawn aside by temptation, or when they sink into declensions of mind. In many things we offend all. For this reason, among others, the wise man recommends society: "When they fall, the one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up."* When a member of a christian church is overtaken with a fault, he has many sincere companions at hand, who will help to restore him in the spirit of meekness, considering themselves lest they also be tempted.† And surely it is an inestimable privilege to have a set of true, judicious, hearty friends about us, to inform us of our mistakes, and to help us to break off those fetters by which we have been entangled, to the injury of our own souls.

An united society of christians enjoys special means for growth in grace, and improvement in the divine life. Several persons, with united zeal, counsel and strength, may do much toward the encouragement and assistance of each other in the way to heaven. They may exhort and teach one another daily; they may comfort, strengthen, and edify one another in love. They hold, and firmly adhere to the head, Christ Jesus, "from whom all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God."‡ They have frequent opportunities of surrounding the table of the Lord, where their souls are satisfied as with marrow and fatness, while

* Eccles. iv. 10. † Gal. vi. 1. ‡ Col. ii. 19.

while they are fed with the bread of God which came down from heaven, to give life unto the world. *

In a word, as they are the household and family of God, they have his special presence with them; they enjoy his smiles of approbation, and are under his care and guardianship. He hath said, "If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them, I will walk among you; and will be your God. If a man love me, he will keep my sayings, and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." † The Lord condescends to visit praying families, as well as the closets where secret devotion is performed in faith and fervour; but he loveth the gates of *Zion* more than all the dwellings of Jacob. There he commands his blessing, even life for evermore. ‡

These are some of the advantages of church fellowship. The wisdom and the goodness of God are therefore abundantly displayed in this appointment. Thus the faith of the gospel is preserved; the worship of God is maintained; the public ministry of the word is supported and encouraged, for the conversion of sinners, and the edification of saints; the best interests of the followers of Christ are promoted; and the kingdom, the grace, and the glory of the Redeemer are manifested in the world.

But perhaps some persons professing godliness, may not choose to come under such strict engagements to holiness as church-relation seems to require. Reader, permit me to ask you, is this your

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case?

* John vi. † John xiv. 23. ‡ Ps. cxxxiii. 3.

case? Is it for this reason that you choose to walk alone, and to keep at a distance from the fellowship of God's people? Are you afraid of having too many eyes and guards upon you, and of coming under too many obligations to devote yourself entirely to the service of your Redeemer? If so, I pity you. I am afraid this disposition of mind betrays a want of integrity, or at least, indicates a defect in your love to Jesus, and your zeal for his honour. The strongest proof of love to him is that of keeping his commandments; esteeming all his precepts concerning all things to be right, and hating every false way. How will you reconcile this with a determination to live at a looser rate than church-relation requires, an unwillingness to come under too many engagements to holiness? Beware of the deceitfulness of your own heart. The plea you make against christian communion will not bear examination.

Another of my readers perhaps may say, 'I could be willing to give up myself to a religious society, could I find one exactly answerable to my wishes. But I see many imperfections, many improprieties and irregularities in the members of churches, as well as in others.' If this indeed be the case, as perhaps it may, it is much to be lamented. But if you refuse to unite with a gospel church till you find one free from all defects, you may live in the neglect of divine ordinances till the day of your death. And if every one were to act on the same principles that you do, there would be no visible church of Christ existing in this world. How do you know but your influence, in conjunction with that of others, might contribute to the correcting of some of those improprieties of which

which you complain? And is it right in you to withhold your helping hand? The imperfections of God's professing people should not disgust you half so much, as the image of Christ apparent in them, should give you pleasure. If God, the glorious and the holy, will dwell among them, notwithstanding all their weaknesses, and all their defects, why should you think them too despicable, and too unworthy to have your company? In fact, the communion of saints is either of divine appointment or it is not. If it is not, it is needless for any man to be much concerned about it. But if it is God's ordinance, for the advancement of his interest and honour in the world, and for the spiritual welfare and happiness of his people, it cannot be right to treat it as a matter of indifference, or as what may be attended to, or neglected at pleasure.—We shall now return from this digression, if it may be so called, and proceed to make some farther remarks on the subject under consideration.

One principal part of the business of a gospel church lies, in having a due regard to the ordinances of divine worship. These in a general view are—Prayer and Thanksgiving. “Prayer was made of the church.* Supplications, prayers, and giving of thanks should be made for all men.† These all continued with one accord with prayer and supplication.‡ By prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be known unto God.”§—Singing the praises of the Most High. To this we have many exhortations in every

* Acts xii. 5. † 1 Tim. ii. 8. ‡ Acts i. 14.
§ Phil. iv. 6.

every part of the sacred scriptures, and, when properly performed, it is a delightful part of divine worship. "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord."* Likewise the reading and due ministration of the word of God. This is of divine appointment, for the most important purposes to the souls of men. "Go, preach the gospel to every creature. † Who hath ears to hear let him hear. ‡ After the reading of the law and the prophets (a practice worthy of imitation by the ministers of Christ) *Paul* stood up and said,—Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins;—and the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together, to hear the word of God." §

The ordinance of the Lord's supper is of great importance. It was instituted by our divine Redeemer the same night in which he was betrayed, with a positive command that it should be observed, in remembrance of him. For the proper celebration of it, the church should come together into one place, as was the common practice of christians in the days of the apostles. || The time for its celebration was originally the first day of the week, ¶ otherwise called the Lord's day. And to me it appears highly probable, that the primitive disciples of Jesus generally attended to it as oft as that day returned, that is, every first day of the week. We have indeed no express rule on this head; but from several hints given both by heathen and

* Eph. v. 19. † Mat. xxviii. 19. ‡ Mat. xiii. 43.
§ Acts xiii. 15, 16, &c. || 1 Cor. xi. 20.
¶ Acts xx. 7.

and christian writers, it appears to have been the custom of the churches, for the three first centuries, to partake of this ordinance every Lord's day. The apostle *Paul* says to the *Corinthians*, "As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come."* This implies that it should be often observed; but how often is not said.

The elements to be used in this solemnity are, bread as a figure of the body of Christ, and wine, as a representation of his blood, which was the price of our redemption. The bread is taken into the hands of the administrator, who, at the same time, shews the nature and design of the ordinance. Then the whole church unites with him in giving thanks to God for the gift of his Son, and for the blessings of salvation by him; and in petitions to the divine throne suitable to the occasion. The minister next breaks the bread, and signifies to the assembly, that this action denotes the sufferings of Christ, whose body was broken for us. From this particular action, the ordinance is called the "breaking of bread."† The administrator then delivers the broken bread unto the deacons, to be distributed among the people, saying to them all, in the name of Christ, and in his own words, "Take eat; this is my body which is broken for you; this do in remembrance of me." The communicants then take the bread, and in a devout and reverent manner, eat it, with spiritual discernment of the Lord's body, a lively faith in Jesus as sacrificed for their sins, and fervent love to him who has loved them, and given himself for them. In

* 1 Cor. xi. 26. † Acts ii. 42, and xx. 7.

In the same manner the cup is taken, with giving of thanks; which is therefore called "the cup of blessing which we bless." † All the communicants then receive the cup at the hands of those that serve; they must consider the wine in it as an emblem and figure of the blood of Jesus, which was shed for the remission of their sins; they must drink of it with reverence, devotion, and an active faith in him whose blood is drink indeed.

When the officers have served all with the bread, they must partake of it themselves, and likewise when they have presented the cup to the rest of the communicants; for it comports best with the character of servants to assist others, before they partake themselves.

A collection is then usually, and very properly made, not only for defraying the expence of the bread and wine, but more especially for the poor, which should not, on this joyful occasion, be scanty, but liberal, according to every one's ability. *

A song of praise to God, suited to the occasion, is highly proper for a conclusion of this solemnity. In this manner the first celebration of the holy supper was terminated. "When they had sung an hymn, they went out." † Joy becomes a feast; and if on any occasion it becometh the just to be thankful, surely it becomes them at such a season as this. It is a christian's nearest approach to his God and Saviour while in this world. In this divine ordinance there is no appearance of outward pomp or splendour. Simplicity, sacred and dignified simplicity reigns through the whole of it, when observed according to the primitive pattern.

Yet

* 1 Cor. xvi. 1, 2. † Matt. xxvi. 30.

‡ 1 Cor. xi. 2, 3, &c.

Yet it is every way worthy of him who ordained it, and who is the life, the sum and the substance of it. Our faith is here assisted by our senses, and we are allowed to see, to touch, to taste, to eat and to drink the bread of life, and the cup of salvation. With believing eyes, we discern the Lord's body, and his precious blood, signified by the elements he has wisely appointed for that purpose. We, by faith, receive him, as our divine and all-sufficient Saviour, we lay claim to him, and apply him to our own souls, with all his saving benefits. The sum of that which is proclaimed in the glad tidings of the kingdom, is contained in this ordinance, that is, that Christ died for our sins according to the scripture. It shews us what the gospel means. It most clearly indicates unto us, deliverance from the wrath to come, freedom from condemnation, reconciliation and friendship with God, the full pardon of our sins, the justification of our persons, and our legal right to everlasting life. And all this, through the Saviour's death in our stead, in consequence of his abundant, free, and astonishing love to our souls.

The dispositions of mind suited to this solemnity are, brotherly affection, sincerity and truth, zeal for God's honour, humiliation for our past offences, faith, love, joy and gratitude, a lively hope of future felicity, together with an earnest desire and steady purpose to live to him who died for us.

We have another positive institution under the present dispensation, which has already been mentioned; I mean that of christian baptism. Of this I cannot treat at large, in a work which is only designed

signed to be a compendium of what relates to the constitution and order of a gospel church. Indeed baptism is not properly a church ordinance, since it ought to be observed before a person be admitted into this relation. It is nevertheless an ordinance of Jesus Christ. It was instituted by him. He gave sanction to it by his own example.* He gave the same commission to his ministers to baptize, as he did to preach the gospel.† It was constantly and invariably attended to by the first christian converts. Much more is said of it in the New Testament, both by way of precept and example, than of the Lord's supper. And the practice of it was signalized by evident tokens of the divine approbation.‡

What baptism is, may easily be learnt by a mind divested of the prejudices of education and custom, from the proper signification of the term; § from the places chosen for the administration of it; || from the circumstances particularly mentioned concerning it; such as going down into the water, and afterwards coming up out of the water; and from its being expressly called a burial.**

This

* Mat. iii. 13, &c. † Mat. xxviii. 19. ‡ Mat. iii. 16, 17. Acts viii. 39.

§ Sir John Floyer justly observes, that "immersion is no circumstance, but the very act of baptism." Calvin says, "The word baptize signifies to plunge; and it is certain that plunging was used by the ancient churches." Instit. L. iv. cap. 15. sect. 19. The learned Selden says, "In England, of late years, the minister baptizes his own fingers rather than the child." Opera, vol. vi. col. 2008.

|| Mat. iii. 6. John iii. 23. ¶ Acts viii. 38. Mat. iii. 16. ** Rom. vi. 4. Col. ii. 12.

This ordinance is highly instructive. Like that of the Lord's supper, it is designed to assist our faith in the blood of Christ for the remission of our sins. "Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." * That which is efficacious for this purpose, is not the element of water, but the fountain opened for sin and uncleanness. Accordingly, baptism is a striking representation of the sufferings, the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus. † It is expressive of the penitent sinner's pollution, of his need of cleansing in every part, of his faith in the Redeemer's atoning blood for that purpose, of his being dead unto sin, and of his rising again to newness of life. ‡ Considered in this light, it is an appointment full of wisdom, significance and glory; highly proper to be attended to, as it was in primitive times, by such and such only as repent of sin, believe in Jesus Christ for salvation, gladly receive the word, and are converted to God. ||

To proceed. Every particular church, constituted according to the order of the gospel, hath full power and authority within itself, for the exercising of discipline, rule and government; or for the proper execution of the laws of Christ, so as may best secure the purity, the honour, and the edification of the whole body. The apostle says to the church at *Corinth*, "Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth." § No church has any power to inflict corporal punishment on its offending members, or to do any thing that may affect their civil liberty,
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* Acts xxii. 16. † Luke xii. 50. ‡ Rom. vi. 4, 5, 6.

|| Acts ii. 41. & viii. 12, 37, 38. § 1 Cor. v. 12, 13.

or temporal property ; much less to impose any thing upon their consciences. It extends no farther, in the case of offenders, than to brotherly admonition, reproof, censure, and exclusion from the society, where no evidence of repentance is apparent. This power is derived from the Lord Jesus Christ, who is a Son in his own house, * and the head over all things to the church. † It arises from the very nature of its constitution, as a free and voluntary society ; and is absolutely necessary to every particular church, for its preservation and its purity.

Every christian society formed on the evangelical plan, is strictly independent of all other religious societies. This privilege ought to be maintained inviolably. No other church, however powerful, numerous, respectable or wealthy; no minister of any other church, however eminent he may be for abilities or influence, has any right to assume arbitrary jurisdiction, or decisive authority over any particular church of Jesus Christ. No synodical assembly, or association of ministers and elders has any power of this kind. For proof of this, we might urge many considerations; but the rule laid down by the great Head of the church, for the internal government of such societies, as it was his divine will should afterwards be established in the world, is fully decisive:

“ If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee

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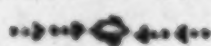
* Heb. iii. 6. † Eph i. 20, 22.

one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be to thee as an heathen man, and a publican. Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* This order was given to the apostles, who were to establish churches through the earth. It is evident that by a church our Lord means such a society as should meet together in one place for the purposes of divine worship, and holy discipline. A society which gives unto particular members an especial relation unto itself, and unto one another. The person supposed to offend is *thy brother*. When private endeavours to reclaim him do not succeed, redress is not to be sought from other ministers, other churches, or synodical assemblies. The direction is, "Tell it to the church," to that particular church of which thou and thy brother are both members; which must be a society to which a poor brother may have ready access, and which, it is evidently suggested, has full power to reason on the case, to judge, to determine, and finally to decide concerning it, according to the knowledge which God has given them of his divine will; and their determination being according to his word, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is present with those who are thus gathered together in his name, † will set his seal to it; so that what is bound or loosed on earth, shall be ratified in heaven.

C 2

Yet

* Mat. xviii. 15, 16, 17, 18, 19. † Mat. xviii. 20.



Yet it may be observed, that where nothing is attempted which might be prejudicial to the just rights and privileges of particular societies, or inconsistent with them, the communion of churches of the same faith and order, by their ministers and other representatives, associated together at particular seasons, is very desirable, and may conduce, under a divine blessing, to the promotion of the common cause, the increase of christian love and friendship, the strengthening of the hands of both ministers and people, and to general edification. Advice and counsel in any case of difficulty may, on these occasions, be requested and given, without any infringement of the rights and privileges of the respective churches. The *Thessalonians* became followers of the churches in *Judea*, which were in Christ. * “ They of *Antioch* determined that *Paul*, *Barnabas* and others should go to *Jerusalem*; and it pleased the apostles and elders, and the whole church at *Jerusalem*, to send chosen men to *Antioch*. †

It appears from what has been said, that there should be some one or more persons in every particular church, invested with official power, for the due administration of the word and the ordinances of God, and the proper management of the temporal affairs of the society. This leads us to observe that every such society has full authority and power to choose its own officers. Thus, in the days of the apostles, elders were ordained in every church, by the suffrage of the people, signified by the lifting up of their hands, as the word denotes. ‡

And

* 1 Thes. ii. 14.

† Acts xv. 2, 22.

‡ Acts xiv. 23.

And the church at *Jerusalem* was thus addressed by the twelve, "Brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report. And the saying pleased the multitude, and they chose *Stephen* and others." *

In the primitive churches there were some extraordinary officers. Such were the apostles, who were immediately called to the work by Jesus Christ, personally considered. They had seen him in the flesh, and received their commission from his own mouth. "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?" † The apostles were not pastors of particular churches. Their labours were not confined to one place; but, as best comported with the design of establishing the kingdom of Christ through the world, extended as far and as wide as possible, answerable to the commission their divine Master had given them, to preach the gospel to every creature.

The officers called evangelists were men qualified in an extraordinary manner, for the same purposes as were the apostles. ‡ *Luke, Philip* and *Timothy* were of this class. They sometimes accompanied *Paul* in his travels, and sometimes were left behind him, to set in order the things that were wanting.

There were prophets and prophetesses in those days, who not only explained the predictions concerning Christ and his kingdom, recorded in the Old Testament, but had the gift of foretelling future events. §

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These

* Acts vi. 2, 3. † 1 Cor. ix. 1. ‡ Eph. iv. 11.
§ Acts xi. 27, 28. & xxi. 9.

These persons were not to be succeeded by any in their respective offices; nor indeed, in the nature of things, could they, when miraculous gifts ceased in the church. Their work was to give full proof of the resurrection of Christ, to preach the gospel to different nations in their own tongues, to raise and constitute churches, and, under divine inspiration, to complete the canon of scripture. When these things were done, the gifts by which they were qualified for these extraordinary purposes, were suspended, and the offices themselves ceased of course.

The ordinary officers appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ, to be continued in his churches in all ages, are bishops and deacons. Such were the stated officers in the church at *Jerusalem*, * and in the church at *Philippi*. † “To all the saints at *Philippi*, with the bishops and deacons.” Bishops are the same with elders, or presbyters. The elders of the church at *Ephesus* are called overseers, or bishops. ‡ They are the same with pastors and teachers. For though there may be teachers in a church who are not as yet called to the pastoral office, yet every bishop or pastor is a teacher. It does not appear that a teacher is an officer distinct from a pastor; for the same persons, who are called teachers in one place, are called both pastors and teachers in another. §

Pastors, teachers, bishops or elders are also called rulers, guides, and governors. A pastor or shepherd is the governor and guide of his flock. A
teacher

* Acts vi. 1. 6. & xv. 2, 4. † Phil. i. 1.

‡ Acts xx. 17, compared with verse 28.

§ 2 Cor. xii. 28, with Eph. iv. 11.

teacher and a ruling elder are the same. "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour (with assiduity and diligence) in the word and doctrine." * A bishop is to take care of the church of God, to overlook it, as the word bishop signifies. This is a considerable branch of his work. † He is not to lord it over God's heritage, or to rule in an arbitrary manner, but according to the laws of Christ, as king of saints. When he does this he is to be respected and obeyed. "Remember them that have the rule over you, and obey them." ‡ Pastors are sometimes called the angels of the churches, chiefly because they are sent of God, and employed in carrying the messages of grace and salvation to men. § They are the ministers or servants of Christ, and the servants of the church for his sake. ¶ They are stewards of the mysteries of God, the various and sublime doctrines of his grace, which they are to teach and dispense in such a manner, as to give to every one a portion of meat in due season. Wisdom and faithfulness are necessary for this purpose. ¶

The office of deacons is distinct from that of pastors. For though some who were originally set apart to this office, were afterwards employed in preaching the gospel, as *Philip* and *Stephen*, ** yet the business of deacons is, in a particular manner, to look after the temporal affairs of the church, to serve tables, and, in a more especial manner, to take care of the poor of the flock of God. So

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* 1 Tim. v. 17.

† 1 Tim. iii. 1, 4, 5.

‡ Heb. xiii. 7, 17.

§ Rev. i. 20.

¶ 1 Cor. iv. 2, 5.

¶ Luke xii. 42.

** Acts vi. 5.

wonderful is his compassion for the poor, that he has appointed a set of officers in his house, to inspect into their necessities, and to see that their wants be supplied in some comfortable measure.

From the variety of names given in the New Testament to pastors and deacons, some have taken occasion to multiply officers in the church; but it is very observable, that we have no account of any officers being appointed or ordained by the apostles, but bishops and deacons. The churches are not called upon to look out for any other. The qualifications and respective duties of these are particularly described; nothing is said of the qualifications and duties of any other officers.

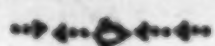
Of these qualifications it may seem necessary that we should take some notice. A bishop must not be a novice, one who is newly planted in the church of God, as the word signifies; but a person of some standing, and some experience in a christian profession, lest being lifted up with pride, on account of his high station, he fall into the condemnation of the Devil, who fell by his pride. * He must be able to teach others; † having a competency of knowledge and understanding of the truths of the gospel. He must be apt to teach; ‡ have a certain readiness of elocution, to express his ideas in an agreeable and edifying manner; otherwise his ability of mind will not be sufficient to qualify him for this office. For it is of little avail what stock of knowledge any man has, if he have not utterance, or an aptitude to clothe his ideas with proper and acceptable words. He must be the
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* 1 Tim. iii. 6. † 2 Tim. ii. 2. ‡ 1 Tim. iii. 2.

husband of one wife. * Polygamy was much in use among the Gentiles, and probably some who were converted to christianity might have been guilty of it. Now though they manifested their repentance of it, together with their other abominations, yet notwithstanding this, to show how hateful this violation of the first law of marriage is, they who had in their unconverted state been guilty of it, were, on that account, for ever disqualified from bearing any office in the church of God. This I take to be the meaning of the apostle in the above-cited text.

A bishop must be one that ruleth well his own house; that is, supposing him to have a family; having his children in subjection with all gravity. A good reason is given for this, in the following words; "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" He must be blameless in his moral character; since any thing which may be amiss in that will tend to bring reproach upon his office, and greatly to obstruct his usefulness. He must therefore be of good behaviour, and have a good report of them that are without, that the ministry be not blamed. To those who are within the church, he should be an example, in word, in conversation, in charity, in faith, in purity. † To this end he must not be addicted to any vice whatever. He should not be given to wine, or any excess in drinking. He ought not to be one who has so little government over himself as to be ready to strike those who provoke him. He should not be a brawler, a litigious, noisy, contentious person; but

* 1 Tim. iii. 2, &c. † 1 Tim. iv. 12.



but he should be patient in bearing reproaches, indignities and insults. He should not be greedy of filthy lucre, or attached to any method of sordid and dishonourable gain, but be moderate in his desires after the wealth of this world, and not covetous of any man's silver, or gold, or apparel. He should be given to hospitality, relieving, according to his ability, the poor and the needy, and being ready to entertain strangers and christian brethren, who may come under his roof. He should be sober, modest, cautious, wise and prudent in all his proceedings. And, finally, he should be vigilant, or watchful, taking heed to himself and to his doctrine, as well as to all the flock over which he is appointed to preside.

The officer of whom we are speaking must first be a member of the church before he can sustain any office in it. He must be one of themselves. * He who is not a member of the church cannot be the pastor of it. His qualifications must be known by the society to which he belongs. They must have had trial of his gifts, and have found his labours to be to their satisfaction and edification. After a sufficient time for probation, the whole church must be called together, to seek God by fervent prayer for his direction on the important occasion, and to consult together on the propriety of calling the candidate to be their pastor. If they are unanimous in their choice of him, they must signify it to him. The minister taking proper time to consider of so weighty a concern, and asking counsel of the great Head of the church, if he finds

* Acts vi. 3, 5. Col. i. 7. & iv. 12.

finds a willingness to comply with the call of his brethren to the office, must testify his readiness to take the oversight of them.* For in the very nature of the thing, there must be a mutual consent and agreement.

On a day appointed for the purpose, the minister is to be ordained, or solemnly set apart to the work. On this occasion there should be a recognition both of the church's call of him, and of his acceptance of that call, for the confirmation of it, and for the satisfaction of other ministers who are called together, to see their order, to be witnesses of the solemn transaction, and to assist them by their prayers. The ministers present unite in offering up suitable petitions to God for the new chosen pastor, and usually lay their hands upon him, according to the custom in primitive times, when the officers of churches were ordained by the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.† Fasting is proper on this solemn occasion. "And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."‡ A word of exhortation is then given, first to the newly-ordained minister, and then to the church who have chosen him to be their pastor.

The duties of pastors are so fully and clearly pointed out in those sacred books, with which persons in that station are supposed to be well acquainted, that there is the less occasion to enlarge on them here. Some hints indeed have already been given on this head, while we have been considering the necessary qualifications for the office of

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* 1 Pet. v. 2. † 1 Tim. iv. 14. ‡ Acts xiii. 3.

a pastor. To these hints we may add, that a person in this station should give himself continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.* As his gifts, his supports, and his success are from above, there is little probability of his fulfilling his ministry, to the glory of God, and the salvation of immortal souls, unless he is fervent and instant in prayer. With great propriety therefore, the apostles of Christ determined to give themselves, in the first place, to this exercise continually, and next, to the ministry of the word. A minister should, like *John* the baptist, be a burning and a shining light.† Love to the Redeemer, zeal for his cause and for the extension of his kingdom, compassion for the souls of poor sinners, and sincere affection for the people of his charge, should inspire his bosom, and animate all his labours. The word of God, which he has to preach to others, should be his perpetual study and delight. He should be assiduous, constant, and diligent in his work; instant in season and out of season, statedly and occasionally, publicly and from house to house, warning every one night and day with tears, that he may be pure from the blood of all men.‡ He should feed the flock of God,§ both the sheep and the lambs, with wholesome food, giving to every one a portion of meat in due season. He should faithfully declare the whole counsel of God; but, directly or indirectly, Christ crucified should be the matter of all his ministrations. In his temper and spirit, and in all his conversation he should be an ensample to the flock,

* Acts vi. 4. † John v. 35. ‡ Acts xx. 26, 31.
 § Acts xx. 28. John xxi. 15, 16, 17.

flock, that he may be the guide of souls in the way to heaven, both by his practice and his preaching.

He should rule in the church as well as teach ; * taking the lead in divine worship, and presiding at church-meetings, to see that all things be done decently and in order, as to the admission of members, giving admonitions, passing censures, excluding impenitent offenders, and restoring such as have been overtaken with a fault, and manifest repentance. His work, though a good work, is very difficult, extensive and weighty, and he has need of all possible encouragement in it. Hence there are certain duties incumbent on the church towards him.

They should love him sincerely for his work's sake. † They should sympathize with him kindly in all his afflictions, and under all his infirmities and discouragements. They should pray for him fervently and constantly. ‡ In praying for him they do in effect pray for themselves. They should attend to his ministrations diligently, and not weaken his hands, and sadden his heart by their absence, or their negligence. They should obey him conscientiously, submitting themselves unto him, as to one who watches for their souls, that he may give an account of them to God with joy, and not with grief. § Their obedient, holy, humble and heavenly walk will afford him the greatest encouragement in his work. In a word, they ought, according to their ability, to provide for him comfortably. This is reasonable. For as he devotes his time and talents to their service in the gospel,

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* Heb. xiii. 17.

† 1 Thes. v. 12, 13.

‡ Eph. vi. 19. Col. iv. 3.

§ Heb. xiii. 18.

and ministers to them in spiritual things, they ought not to suffer him to starve, but should minister to him in carnal things. *

Deaconship, in general, signifies any service or ministry. But by deacons in a church of Christ, as distinguished from bishops, we are to understand a set of officers, who, as we have already observed, are to take care of the temporal concerns of the society. They should be men full of wisdom.† They should hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.‡ They should be men of honest report.§ They ought to be grave, not double tongued, not greedy of filthy lucre, not given to much wine; but such as rule their own houses and their children well. Their wives must be grave, not slanderers, but sober, and faithful in all things. The deacons should be first proved, and then chosen by the church, and with their own consent, set apart to the office. ||

Their work is to serve tables; ¶ to provide the bread and wine for the Lord's table, to distribute both to the people, and to receive the contributions for answering all expences, and for relieving those who are in want. It would be well for them always to observe what members are absent, that proper inquiries may be made into the cause of such absence. They are to visit the poor, assist them by their counsels and their prayers, and communicate the church's bounty unto them. This is *writing on their ministry*; it is shewing mercy, and ought to be done with chearfulness, and simplicity.

* Rom. xv. 27. Mat. x. 9. 10. 1 Cor. ix. 7—14.

† Acts vi. 3. ‡ 1 Tim. iii. 9. § Acts vi. 3.

|| 1 Tim. iii. 8—12.

¶ Acts vi. 2, 3.

plicity. * The table of the pastor of the church should in a sense be served by the deacons. They should see that his wants are supplied, stir up the members to the discharge of their duty to him, receive what they severally contribute, and give it to him; keeping an exact and faithful account of all receipts and disbursements. They who use this office well procure to themselves a good degree of honour, esteem and respect in the church; and, by conversing more intimately with the minister than others, and visiting, praying with, and comforting the poor members of the community, they grow rich in spiritual experience, and acquire great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.†

It is the duty of the church to encourage the deacons in their office, to receive their exhortations to liberality with a willing and obedient mind, to pray for them, to be grateful to them for the services they perform, and to hold them in reputation. ‡ As they execute the office without any temporal reward, and exert themselves on all occasions for the welfare of the church, and the comfort of its distressed members, they are certainly entitled to a high degree of gratitude and esteem from their brethren. §

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* Rom. xii. 7, 8.

† 1 Tim. iii. 13.

‡ 1 Cor. xvi. 15, 16.

§ It is pretty certain that there were, in the primitive church, pious aged women who were called *deaconesses*. Their particular business was to assist in the entertainment of the apostles, and other itinerant preachers; to visit the sick, and such as were im-

pri-

Having thus briefly considered the constitution of a particular gospel church, according to the plan laid down in the New Testament, and having mentioned its stated officers, and their respective duties, we shall now add a few hints relative to the discipline necessary to be observed by such a society. The honour of Christ, the credit of his cause, and the purity, the peace, and the prosperity of his church are all concerned in the maintaining of proper order and discipline.

Of our divine Redeemer it is said, "The government shall be upon his shoulder." * To his kingdom, which is not of this world, he has given laws for the proper regulation of every thing in it. These laws are comprehensive, and fully sufficient for every purpose, without the addition of canons
or

prisoned for the sake of the gospel; to instruct the younger females, and to accompany them when they attended to the ordinance of baptism. Of this number was *Phebe*, a servant or deaconess of the church at *Cenchrea*, Rom. xvi. 1. And probably the apostle *Paul* means such, when he speaks of those women who laboured with him in the gospel, Phil. iv. 3. *Pliny*, in his letter to *Trajan*, speaks of two female christians whom he put to the torture, *quæ ministræ dicebantur*, who were called deaconesses. Plin. Epist. 97. The peculiar circumstances of the church required such assistants in those times. And, indeed, though the scripture is silent as to any appointment to the office of deaconesses, and gives us no rules about it, a plain indication that it was not meant to be continued, as an office, in after ages, yet the voluntary services of pious matrons, in their proper sphere, will always be found necessary and beneficial.

* Isai. ix. 6.

or rules invented by men, or imposed by the authority of synodical assemblies.

The officers which Christ has appointed in his church, have no power to give new laws to it; but only, in conjunction with the other members of the society, to execute the commands of Zion's King. They have no dominion over any man's faith, * nor any compulsive power over the consciences of any.

The addition of new members to a christian society is very desirable, and deserves particular attention. Without additions no society, whether civil or religious, could long subsist. The strokes of mortality would, in a course of time, reduce them to nothing. The churches of Christ are furnished with the means of increase. The ministry of the word is to compel sinners to come in, that the house may be full, and the table furnished with guests; for all things are now ready. † The gospel trumpet sounds an alarm to perishing sinners, and invites the miserable to accept of mercy. It calls strangers and foreigners to become fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God. The fervent prayers and supplications of the church, for the conversion of sinners, are added to the affectionate labours of the minister, who travails in birth till Christ be formed in the hearts of his hearers. And when Zion thus travails, she brings forth children. ‡ Some are also won over to the ways of religion by the chaste and holy conversation of its adherents. § The success of these means, however, is so far dependent on the blessing

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sing

* 2 Cor. i. 24.

† Isai. lxvi. 8.

‡ Luke xiv. 23.

§ 1 Pet. iii. 1, 2.

sing of him who only can give the increase, that some churches are suffered to labour under discouragements for a long season, for want of additions to their number; and the ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to her solemn feasts.

Every particular church has a right to judge of the fitness of those who offer themselves as candidates for fellowship with them. When *Saul* assayed to join himself to the disciples, they were afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple, * a real converted person, till he related to them what a change God had wrought in his mind. It will occur to every reader, that such persons only should be added to a religious society, as are proper to compose such society in its first constitution.

They should not be persons grossly ignorant of divine subjects, but apparently possessed of some knowledge of the chief and distinguishing doctrines of christianity. Jesus therefore said, "It is written in the prophets, They shall be all taught of God. Every man that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me." †

They should give some evidence of sincere repentance of sin, and of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. Those who were added to the primitive churches were penitent sinners; they renounced their former errors and follies, turned to God, and brought forth fruits meet for repentance. They embraced the precious gospel, gave firm credit to its salutary report, and believed in Jesus for the remission of their sins, and for everlasting life. Believers were added, multitudes, both of men and women. ‡ Churches are to receive

* Acts ix. 26.

† John vi. 45.

‡ Acts v. 14.

ceive him that is weak in the faith, but not him that is destitute of it. *

They should appear to be such as love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. For if any man love not Jesus, he is so far from having a right to communion with his people, that he lies under a dreadful anathema. †

They should, in some form or other, make a declaration to the church of what God has done for their souls, in turning them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to himself. Thus, in primitive times, they that believed came (to the apostles and the church assembled together) and confessed and shewed their deeds. ‡ They should confess before men their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and give a reason of the hope that is in them, of everlasting life through his name, with meekness and fear. § They should declare their hearty subjection to the authority of Christ, and the order of his church; their willingness to take his yoke upon them, to follow his example, and, through the power of his grace and Spirit, to labour after a conformity to his will in every thing.

When something of this kind is done before the church, according to the capacity and abilities of the persons proposing for fellowship, it may not be improper for the parties so proposing to withdraw, that the brethren may freely converse together, as well on the confession of faith which has been made before them, as on what relates to the life and conversation of those who have given it. Inquiry should be made, whether they give evidence

* Rom. xiv. 1. † 1 Cor. xvi. 22. ‡ Acts xix. 18.

§ 1 Peter iii. 15. Mat. x. 32.

dence of their sincerity, by abstaining from the sinful customs and practices of the world; whether they be just and faithful in their dealings; whether they manifest christian love to the followers of the Redeemer; whether they attend to the duties of religion in their domestic connections; and whether they give proof of being born of God by overcoming the world, living as strangers and pilgrims in it, and setting their affection on things above.

If the members of the community be satisfied in respect to the parties proposing for fellowship, it should be signified to them; and on their being baptized according to the order of Christ, and the example of primitive christians, they are to be added to the church. * On this occasion, when some short account of the duties, incumbent on the members of churches one to another, has been laid before the candidates, and the question solemnly put to them in the presence of God, and of his assembled people, whether they do willingly give up themselves to the Lord and to his church, with full purpose of heart to walk in all his ordinances and commands as he shall be pleased to enable them; and their consent to this being signified, it may perhaps be proper for the minister to address the brethren present, in words to the following purpose; 'Brethren, if you do, as a church of Christ, receive these persons into full communion with you, and purpose, through divine grace, to treat them in all respects as members of the same body, please to signify it by holding up your right hands.' This being done, and suitable petitions of-

* Acts ii. 42.

offered up to God for the newly-received members, as well as for the whole church, that this union may be for the glory of the Redeemer, and the edification and comfort of all the parties concerned, the minister may, in the name of the church, give unto the brethren now added, the right hand of fellowship. *

It is not pretended that every circumstance here mentioned is to be observed without variation; but like other transactions in the house of God, every thing relating to the admission of new members is to be done decently and in order. † The mode may be varied at the discretion of the minister. What we mean chiefly to insist upon, as necessary to the comfort and prosperity of the church, is, that great care and caution are to be used in the admission of members, that the church has a right to judge of the fitness of persons proposing for fellowship, that they are to have an active concern in the business, and that those who appear to be true penitents and real believers, though weak in the faith, are to be received as it becometh saints.

Allowances should be made for the weaknesses and infirmities of men, both as to what relates to the good work begun in them by the power of the divine Spirit, and to their knowledge of the truths of the gospel. The day of small things is not to be despised. The bruised reed is not to be broken, nor the smoking flax to be quenched. The tender lambs are gathered into the arms of the good Shepherd, and carried in his bosom. And he gave a particular charge to *Peter*, as a proper expression
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* Gal. ii. 9.

† 1 Cor. xiv. 40.

of love to him, to be attentive to his lambs. “*Simon son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Feed my lambs.*” *

The exclusion of persons from the societies of God’s people too frequently becomes necessary in the present state of things. In the purest age of the church, as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles, and the epistles addressed to the several churches established in different parts of the world, there arose disorderly persons, whom it was necessary to put away. The *Theſſalonians* were highly commended by *Paul*. He gloried in them wherever he came; because their faith grew exceedingly, and their charity towards one another abounded. Yet there were some among them who were unruly, and walked disorderly, from whom they were commanded to withdraw themselves. †

The exclusion of a person from a christian church, does not affect his temporal estate, and civil affairs. It does not subject him to fines or imprisonment. It interferes not with the business of the civil magistrate. It makes no change in the natural and civil relations between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants. Neither does it deprive a man of the liberty of attending on the ministry of the word, or the public ordinances of the sanctuary. Twice we read in the epistles of *Paul* of notorious offenders being delivered unto Satan. ‡ But this act appears to me to be what was peculiar to him as an apostle, endowed with miraculous gifts. He did it in concurrence with *the power of our Lord Jesus Christ*.
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* John xxi. 15.

† 2 Theſ. iii. 6.

‡ 1 Cor. v. 3. 5.

1 Tim. i. 20.

He made use of that apostolic rod, by which he smote *Elymas* the forcerer with blindness, and by which *Ananias* and *Sapphira* were struck dead. These are awful instances of the divine displeasure, peculiarly intended for the vindication of the cause of Christ in its first establishment, with which the ordinary discipline of a gospel church is entirely unconnected.

In the act of exclusion, a church can take no more from any member of the society than what it first gave him, that is, a name and place in the house of God. It is the removal of an impenitent offender from the communion of the church, and from all privileges dependent upon it. Great care should be taken that this be not done rashly, imprudently, or upon unjust grounds. It is a solemn act, which should never be attended to for the gratifying of sinful passions and resentments. *Diotrephes* loved to have the pre-eminence, and carried matters so far as to cast men out of the church. * But no individual should have this undue influence. The power of exclusion, as of admission, lies in the church itself. When there is an evident call to this painful work, the officers may take the sense of the members assembled together; after the matter has been deliberately considered by them, and all the necessary steps taken to reclaim the offender, without the desired effect, the church may proceed to his actual exclusion from among them. The minister may address them in some such manner as the following: 'Brethren, if you do unanimously, as a church of Christ, judge this person unworthy of a place in God's house, and think

* 3 John 9, 10.



think it your duty, in the name of our Lord Jesus, to exclude him from this community, please to signify it by holding up your right hands.' After which it may be highly proper for them to unite in prayer to God, for the recovery and restoration of the offender, humbling themselves before the throne of grace on the mournful occasion, and earnestly entreating the Lord that they may all be preserved from those things which are inconsistent with their christian profession, and with the privilege of having a name and a place in the church of God.

Afflictive as the work of exclusion is, it ought by no means to be neglected, when there is an evident call to it. A church of Christ is like a garden, or a vineyard. But if proper discipline be neglected, it will soon be as the field of the slothful, and the vineyard of the man void of understanding. It will be grown over with thorns, nettles will cover the face of it, and the stone-wall thereof will be broken down. * The name of God and his doctrine are dishonoured by the evil conduct of church-members, and the most effectual way of removing that dishonour, is by the exclusion of offenders. It is by this procedure that the church is purged, and preserved from infection. A little leaven leavens the whole lump; the old leaven must therefore be removed. Evil communications corrupt good manners. "Put away from among yourselves the wicked person, † is the invariable law of the house of God. Among the *Jews* lepers were to be put out of the camp, that they might not infect others.

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* Prov. xxiv. 30, 31. † 1 Cor. v. 7, 13.

The act of exclusion is still farther necessary for the good of the offender. It is God's own institution; and when attended to in his fear, it is not for destruction, but for edification. It has often been the mean of bringing the disorderly person to repentance of his sins, and an acknowledgment of them. When the Lord is pleased thus to bless his own appointment, the penitent person is to be received again into the bosom of the church, with love and tenderness, and to be comforted, lest he should be swallowed up of overmuch sorrow. *

The persons who should be excluded from a religious society, are such as are quarrelsome and litigious, disturbing the church's peace, and causing divisions and offences. "I would they were even cut off which trouble you." † Such as desert their privileges, withdraw themselves from the ordinances of God, and forsake his people. These "separate themselves," ‡ and it can be of no advantage, if they persevere in this practice, to have the name of church-membership continued, when every thing but the name is given up. Such as are irregular and immoral in their lives. With railers, drunkards, extortioners, fornicators, and the covetous, we are commanded not to eat, especially at the Lord's table. "For no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. § Such as fall into dangerous and destructive errors, subversive of the gospel of Christ, should be rejected after the first and second

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* Jude 23. 2 Thes. iii. 14. 2 Cor. ii. 7.
† Gal. v. 12. ‡ Jude 19. § Eph. v. 5. 1 Cor. v. 11.

admonition. * Such as suffer their near relatives to want the common necessities of life, when they have it in their power to relieve them. For he that “provides not for his own, especially them of his own house, hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.” †

Perhaps in some cases, where the crime is highly scandalous, it may be necessary, as soon as the fact is clearly proved, for the honour of God and his cause, to exclude the offender immediately. The apostle *Paul* gives no direction for any previous steps to be taken with the incestuous person, in the church at *Corinth*; but commands them to put him away. This had a very happy effect, both on the offender himself, and on the whole church. ‡ But in general cases, admonitions, exhortations, reproofs, prayers, and such like gentle means must first be used. “If a man be overtaken with a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such a one in the spirit of meekness. § The rule our Lord Jesus Christ has given us in respect to private offences, should be strictly regarded. “If thy brother trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault. If he will not hear thee, take with thee one or two more; if he will not hear them, tell it to the church.” || After all proper endeavours have been used, with tenderness and faithfulness, and a first and second admonition given by the church, or her messengers, if the offender appear to be obstinate, and persist in his sin, there is no remedy but exclusion. “Thou shalt not suffer sin upon thy brother.” That is a high commendation which is given

* Tit. iii. 10. † 1 Tim. v. 8. ‡ 1 Cor. v. 13.
 2 Cor. vii. 11. § Gal. v. 7. || Mat. xviii. 16, 17.

given of the church at *Ephesus*, by him that walks among the golden candlesticks, "I know thee, that thou canst not bear them that are evil." *

In any matter which comes before the church, all the brethren have an equal right to speak their sentiments. But this should be done with modesty, seriousness, and humility. Great care should be used on all hands to avoid strife and contention. It is very desirable that the members of the community be of one mind in all their transactions. No one should be obstinate or self-willed; but there should be a readiness to submit one to another, in the fear of God. † "Let nothing be done through strife or vain-glory. Be not wise in your own conceits." ‡ Every individual should be tender of the peace of the community, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; following after the things which make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another. With exhortations of this kind the New Testament abounds; and he who is not disposed to pay attention to them will not be a comfortable member of a christian society. "Be of one mind, live in peace, and the God of love and peace shall be with you." § The psalmist *David* was charmed and delighted with the consideration of this. "Behold, how good, and how pleasant a thing it is, for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is as the dew of *Hermon*, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of *Zion*: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life forevermore." ||

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* Rom. ii. 2. † Eph. v. 21. ‡ Phil. ii. 3. Rom. xii. 16.
§ 2 Cor. xiii. 11. || Ps. cxxxiii. 1, 3.

Should any question come before a christian community, relative to the admission or exclusion of members, or any other concern, which can no otherwise be decided than by putting it to the vote, the minor part should peaceably submit to the major, as far as they possibly can, without violation of their own consciences. To this they should be induced, out of regard to the honour of Christ, and the peace of the society, according to the rule given by the apostle *Peter*, "Be ye subject one to another." * In all such cases it should seem to be the will of God, that the women should keep silence. But if any woman in church-communion be requested to speak her sentiments, she has doubtless a right so to do. "If the women would learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home. But let your women keep silence in the churches—for they are commanded to be in subjection. I suffer not a woman to teach, or to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." †

Besides the general duties of worship and discipline, which we have already briefly considered, there are certain duties belonging to church-members, as such; with a transient view of which we shall close our remarks on this subject.

The chief of these may be summed up in that sincere and mutual affection which is so often insisted on in the New Testament, under the name of brotherly love. This is the fulfilling of the law, and the end of the gospel. It is the fruit of our being chosen to salvation, and the consequence of our redemption by Jesus Christ. It is a proof of our

* 1 Peter v. 5. + 1 Cor. xiv. 34, 35.
1 Tim. ii. 8, 10, 11, 12.

our being born of God, and the evidence of our dwelling with him for ever. Jesus has said, "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another, as I have loved you. * By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one towards another." A religious society, walking in love, is "beautiful as *Tirza*, comely as *Jerusalem*, and terrible as an army with banners." Love is stiled the very bond of perfectness. The hearts of christians are then comforted when they are knit together in love. The goodness and the pleasantness of christian fellowship are inseparably connected with it. Scarcely too much can be said in its favour; for it has every thing to recommend it, both as to what relates to a man's own self, to the prosperity of the church of God, the credit of religion, the adorning of the gospel, and the glorifying of our heavenly Father.

The members of christian churches are so to walk in love, as to bear one another's burdens, to pour out constant and fervent supplications one for another, to visit one another for spiritual edification, to relieve one another in necessity, to use hospitality without grudging, to be pitiful, courteous, and kind-hearted one to another. †

They should manifest this love by a constant endeavour to cultivate peace and harmony, following after the things which make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another. To this end, they should be subject one to another in all humility. They should do nothing through strife or vain-glory, but in honour prefer one another.

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* John xiii. 34. † Gal. vi. 2. Eph. vi. 18.
Mat. xxv. 36. Rom. xii. 13. 1 Peter iv. 9, 10.

They should not avenge themselves, but give place unto wrath. They should avoid rash judging, evil-furnishing, evil-speaking, whisperings and back-biting. They should terminate, as much as possible, all differences among themselves, forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven them, and mutually give and take reproof, in the spirit of meekness, not suffering sin one upon another. *

They should meekly submit to the order and discipline of the society, and not despise the church of God. They should devote their gifts and abilities to the service of their brethren. "As every man hath received the gift so let him minister the same." They should fill up their places regularly at all church-meetings, and not be absent from the Lord's table at any time, without just and lawful reasons. They should maintain and hold fast the doctrines of the gospel in their purity. They should have the welfare of the church at heart continually, and pray earnestly for its prosperity. †

They ought, with freedom and simplicity, to communicate one to another their spiritual experiences; the trials, temptations and difficulties they meet with in the way, and the supports, comforts and deliverances with which they are favoured. Like the pious Psalmist, they should be ready to say, "Come, and hear, ye that fear God, and I will tell you what he hath done for my soul." ‡ It is by knowing the state of one another's minds that
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* 1 Peter v. 5. Gal. vi. 26. Phil. ii. 3. Rom. xii. 10. Col. iii. 13. Rom. xii. 19, & xi. 13. 1 Cor. vi. 7, 8. Gal. vi. 1. † Eph. v. 21. 1 Cor. xi. 22.
1 Peter iv. 10. Acts. ii. 42, 44. Heb. 10. 23, 25. Psal. cxi. 6. ‡ Psal. lxvi. 16.

brotherly affection is promoted; when it is found, that, as in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man. * By this mean christian sympathy is excited, so that we rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. We are hence furnished with abundant matter for continual intercession before the divine throne. An opportunity is hereby given for friendly admonition, exhortation, instruction and comfort. And a word spoken in due season, how good is it! † Christians who neglect this mutual intercourse, deprive themselves of all these advantages.

In the year 1748, Mr. *Roldanus*, a minister of the Calvinistic persuasion, in the province of *Guelders*, in the *Netherlands*, was the honoured instrument of the revival of religion in that place. This holy and zealous man, impressed with deep concern on account of the ignorance, formality and impiety of some of his hearers, undertook the work of catechising them in public, in order to rouse them from their insensibility, and to give them more distinct views of the doctrines of christianity. His labours were attended with very desirable effects. The people were stirred up to search the scriptures, and to earnest and fervent prayer. Seeing these dawnings of piety, the minister appointed several experience-meetings, on the evening of the Lord's day, at the houses of such of his hearers as feared God. Here inquiry was made how they had profited by the religious exercises of the past day, what temptations they might labour under, and what notions they entertained of the gospel, of faith in Christ, and of a regenerate state.

* Prov. xxvii. 19.

† Prov. xv. 23.

state. The number in each class continually increased, so that the fatigue of meeting them, after the labours of the pulpit, was too great; he therefore ordered them to assemble on other convenient evenings, after their return from their usual occupations.

Mr. *Roldanus*, encouraged by these hopeful appearances, was one day preaching from the prophetic words of the Psalmist, "There shall be a handful of corn in the earth, upon the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like *Lebanon*, and they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth;"* there was a surprising out-pouring of the Spirit upon the congregation, the effects of which were so apparent, that the minister could scarcely proceed in his work, on account of the tears, the cries and lamentations of those who were brought to a sense of their miserable state, as sinners. The work went on to that degree, that sometimes fifty persons came in one day to the minister's house, in deep distress of conscience, inquiring what they must do to be saved.

It is very observable, that wherever there has been a revival of powerful godliness, there has been also a revival of christian communion; and wherever vital religion has declined, the professors of it have, by degrees, forsaken the assembling of themselves together, and dropped that spiritual intercourse for which I am now pleading; they have become strangers to one another's state of minds, and, neglecting those means which God has appointed for the promoting and maintaining of love, fervency and zeal, have sunk into that spirit of
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* Psal. lxxii. 15.

lukewarmness, which is so detestable in the eyes of Jesus Christ; * for how can one be warm alone? †

In the vallies of *Piedmont*, a poor and an afflicted people have resided from age to age, who have maintained the doctrines of christianity in their purity, and given convincing proofs of the power of those doctrines on their hearts and lives. In the history of their churches, published by *John Leger*, an account is given of the spiritual intercourse the members of the several societies had with one another. For the purpose of inculcating religious instruction, and communicating christian experience, every village or neighbourhood belonging to these churches was provided with one or more persons, who were to watch over a small number of their brethren, to inquire into the state of their minds, to talk with them concerning their faith in the Redeemer, and their experience of the power of his grace upon their hearts.

I have enlarged the more upon this head, because I apprehend it to be of great importance, and am afraid it is too much neglected. The advantages of church-communion will be in a great measure lost to us, if we forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, ‡ and have no other intercourse than barely seeing one another's faces in the same house, on a Lord's day. I earnestly wish that these hints may make suitable impressions on the minds of my readers.

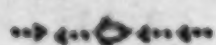
In our first setting out in the ways of religion, we generally suffer much through ignorance, unnecessary scruples and disquieting fears, for want of opening our hearts to intelligent christians. To

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* Rev. iii.

† Eccl. iv. 11.

‡ Heb. x. 25.



a mind just emerging from its native darkness, many things appear to be obscure, which are clearly understood by persons of more experience. A road may be plain and easy to him that is accustomed to it; but a stranger needs the direction and guidance of a friend. Many persons, for instance, under serious impressions of mind, have been much perplexed, while they have read in one part of the New Testament, that without faith a man cannot please God; and in another, that if a man have faith as a grain of mustard-seed, he may remove mountains, and do other wonderful works. Some, for want of better information, have been induced to put their faith to this trial. A hint from a christian brother might have removed their perplexity in a moment, by teaching them to distinguish between saving faith, and the faith of miracles.

Many weak christians, who are harassed by violent temptations, and disquieted through the prevalence of inward depravity, conclude their case to be singular, and are ready to sink into despair; but by hearing the experiences of others, they would be greatly relieved, when they understood that the same afflictions attended their brethren who are in the world. *

I shall now refer these hints, on the constitution and order of a gospel church, to the candid reader's serious examination, requesting him to search the scriptures whether these things are so.

May all the churches have rest, and be edified; and, walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, be multiplied.

* 1 Pet. v. 9.

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